

## BULLETIN NO. 10

# Emergency Drills and Exercises

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### Preparing for Emergency Drills and Exercises

Emergency drills and exercises are important tools for preparing a school for emergency situations. Unfortunately, many schools and local emergency responders aren't ready to hold these events. There are six steps a school should follow prior to conducting an emergency drill or exercise

1. Develop emergency plans
2. Train on the emergency plans
3. Conduct Tabletop Exercises
4. Conduct Drills
5. Conduct Functional Exercises
6. Conduct Full-scale Exercise

### Common Exercise Mistakes

When schools rush into performing emergency exercises they often run into the following problems.

- Exercises are conducted without any defined objectives
- Scenarios are too complex to manage successfully
- Inadequate time is allotted for exercise interaction
- No accurate critique of the exercise afterwards
- Emotional impact of participants is not considered
- Safety of participants is not addressed properly
- Exercise is planned and initiated too quickly
- Some critical agencies are not included
- After action recommendations are not implemented

### Step One: Develop Emergency Plans

Drills and exercises are actually just tests of a school's written emergency plan. Do not hold a drill or exercise until you have:

- A comprehensive emergency/crisis master plan
- Position-specific emergency response guides for all staff with critical roles
- Classroom emergency quick response guides

Since it is virtually impossible to identify and plan for every possible or potential hazard that could impact your school, emergency plans should be response-based instead of hazard-based. This means the emergency plans should be based on the actions you want your staff and students to perform regardless of the emergency. These 10 responses will cover 99% of all the emergencies a school may face.

1. Evacuation
2. Reverse Evacuation
3. Lock Out
4. Lock Down
5. Clear the Halls
6. Shelter in Place
7. Medical Emergency
8. School Closing or Cancellation
9. Death
10. Vehicle Accident

Within the school's comprehensive emergency/crisis master plan is where the variations on each of these 10 responses will be outlined for common hazards that will make the response necessary.



**Example:** Evacuation – There are several reasons why a school may evacuate; fire, gas leak, lack of power, etc. and the Master Plan should detail the district and building response and recovery for each of these hazards, but the immediate response by building administrators, staff and students is to safely evacuate the building and if necessary seek safety at another location.

### **Step Two: Train Staff & Students**

All school staff and students should be trained at least annually on the emergency response plans and guides and their roles within the plans. All plans should be shared with your local emergency responders, but not made publicly available.

### **Step Three: Conduct Tabletop Exercises**

Tabletop exercises allow schools to test their emergency plans and individuals' knowledge of their roles and responsibilities using hypothetical situations without causing disruption to the school day. These exercises should be very limited in scope, covering a specific aspect of your emergency crisis plan.

Tabletop exercises are similar to a scenario-based board game. The facilitator presents a scenario to the "players" around the table who verbally respond what actions they would take based on the available information. Additional information is provided to the players a little at a time, similar to how information becomes available during real emergency events. The group must adjust and respond as the new information becomes available. A recorder makes notes of items within the plan that need to be changed or added based on the responses and other opportunities for improvement verbalized during the event. These exercises usually last between 1 and 2 hours.

Successful tabletop exercises help identify weak points in your emergency plan so you can modify it as necessary. It is much better to find out your limitations in a controlled environment than during an actual emergency.

The people involved in your tabletop exercise will vary depending on which section of your emergency plan you are testing. When you first start facilitating tabletop exercises, it's helpful to just include a small group of district employees, adding local emergency responders later in the process. Example participants may include:

- Administration District/Building Staff
- Department Heads
- Teachers
- Custodial Staff
- Transportation Staff
- Safety/Security Personnel
- Fire Department/EMS
- Law Enforcement
- Emergency Management
- Crisis Team Members
- School Nurse

Tabletop exercises are a continual process. Even when you believe you have your plans well tested you should continue to hold tabletop exercised at least annually to keep staff sharp on their roles. You should also conduct tabletop exercises when you have staff changes, building changes, equipment changes or when you adjust your emergency plans.

### **Step Four: Conduct Drills**

Most schools probably already conduct several types of mandated drills (fire, tornado, etc.) during the year. Conducting other emergency drills is also important even if they are not mandated. Emergency drills such as lockdown, shelter-in-place, vehicle accidents or clear the halls provide the training and rote memorization of the skill sets necessary for emergency situations.



All emergency drills should be highly controlled, test a single procedure and involve both students and staff. Drills should be unannounced and under varying and non-ideal conditions (e.g., different times of day, weather conditions, different times during academic calendar, during absence of key personnel). Students and staff should be trained prior to any drill to make sure they know what is expected. Invite local emergency responders to observe the drill.

**Step Five: Functional Exercises**

After you have performed a number of drills on specific procedures, the next step is functional exercises. Functional exercises help you understand how your emergency plans will integrate with local emergency responder's plans, how your incident command structure is operating and how you will actually communicate to emergency responders during an emergency. These exercises are scenario-based, like tabletop exercises, but are conducted in a realistic, real-time environment, without actual movement of personnel and equipment. They involve all areas/ departments of the school district and likely all departments of the local emergency responders. These exercises are often conducted in several different rooms to exercise communication needs and a more realistic disconnect between the school and the emergency responders. These types of exercises must be highly managed to produce useful results. Unlike drills, functional exercises must be extensively planned and advance notification given,

**Step Six: Full-Scale Exercises**

A full-scale exercise is a complex, multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional, multi-organizational exercise that is designed to validate many facets of emergency plans and preparedness. They not only test the school's emergency plans but also the plans of the responding agencies. Very few schools ever perform this type of exercise due to the time (6-8 months of planning), coordination and expense involved. Full-scale exercises are conducted in real-time, creating a stressful, time-constrained environment that closely mirrors real events in a safe manner. This may include simulated building damage, human casualties, active search and rescue, mass transportation and other activities depending on the scenario.

**After-Action Reporting**

After-action reporting allows you to discuss, evaluate and document the results of drills, tabletop, functional or full-scale exercises. This helps analyze the emergency plans and participants performances and provides corrective actions for areas identified for improvement. This is an important part of any exercise and should not be overlooked. The goal of the previously discussed exercises is not complete until the recommendations from the after-action reporting process are implemented.

**Improvement Plan**

An improvement plan serves as the roadmap to making changes, additions and deletions to your emergency plan or training. Use the after-action report to establish an improvement plan. Make sure the plan sets specific goals and assigns tasks to those affected with clear, specific deadlines. No matter what drills or exercises you conduct, at a minimum, plans should be reviewed annually and revised as necessary.

**For additional information or questions, please contact one of the following:**

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The Iowa School Safety Coalition was formed in December 2012. Participating organizations include Iowa Homeland Security & Emergency Management, Iowa State Fire Marshal, Iowa Division of Intelligence and Fusion Center, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Emergency Management Association, Des Moines Police Department, Iowa State Education Association, Iowa Association of School Boards, School Administrators of Iowa, American Institute of Architects – Iowa Chapter, EMC Insurance Companies.